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FOR WHA/CAR AND INR/IAA

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [SOCI](#) [TD](#)
SUBJECT: COP PARTY PLANS TO STAY VIABLE

Classified By: DCM Len Kusnitz, Reason 1.4(b,d)

11. (C) Summary: The Ambassador met with Congress of the People (COP) Winston Dookeran February 27 in a discussion that focused on the opposition leader's efforts to keep his party relevant despite it failing to secure seats in last November's parliamentary vote. Dookeran, who has been under some criticism from party regulars who feel adrift, is targeting a limited number of seats in the upcoming local elections as a way to regain momentum. The COP head also has hopes of promoting pan-Caribbean advances on good governance. End summary.

COP Future

12. (C) COP leader Winston Dookeran invited the Ambassador, accompanied by PolOff, to lunch February 27 to provide an update on his party's efforts to remain relevant despite winning no seats in last November's parliamentary elections. Though it made a respectable showing, and garnered 148,000 votes, the COP was unable to break through in any PNM or UNC strongholds. Since then, the COP has suffered from some defections and in-fighting, and also a sense of drift, exacerbated by Dookeran's recent extended trip to Canada where he visited relatives and did some writing.

13. (C) After exchanging pleasantries, Dookeran informed the Ambassador that the COP intends to contest the upcoming local elections (date this year still TBD) and will not join in an opposition alliance with the UNC. Perhaps stung by criticisms that the COP should have cooperated with the UNC in the parliamentary vote, Dookeran stated that the COP will not run a candidate for all 127 seats. Rather, it will focus on approximately 40 seats in the hopes of winning 20. To contest all 127 seats and only win 20, he explained, would be viewed as a defeat. Instead, winning half the seats it contests would be taken by the general public as a victory.

14. (C) The COP intends to target PNM areas where they were competitive in the 2007 general election. In all likelihood, the party will not contest UNC-held seats. This would not be an alliance, Dookeran underscored, since as long as the UNC's current leadership (former PM Basdeo Panday) remains in place, a meeting of minds will not be possible. Dookeran said he has been able to maintain this position despite some senior members of the COP supporting an electoral alliance.

15. (C) Turning to how he intends the COP to run in the upcoming race, the political leader said his party would focus on grass roots organizing. Dookeran felt confident the COP would be able to maintain the support of a significant number of those who backed it last November, despite the media now dismissing the party as irrelevant. To counter this perception, the COP has developed a public awareness

campaign, to include both an internet campaign and educational outreach program. Dookeran concluded that, based on the survival strategy he outlined, the current administration's poor performance (e.g. crime, scarcity of affordable food, inflation), and a successful showing in local government elections, the COP will be well positioned for general elections in four to five years.

Broad Trends

¶16. (C) Dookeran then commented on what he sees as broader trends in the Caribbean and beyond. He suggested that opposition wins in the region, and the success of the Obama campaign in the U.S., are indicative of a strong wave of sentiment in favor of political change. The COP seeks to both ride this wave here and be the local agent of change (the COP made a similar argument before the general election). Continuing on this thought, he added that some COP supporters question the method of selecting the party's leadership. As such, Dookeran has been researching the U.S. primary election and Electoral College systems as alternative methods of choosing a political leader.

A Proactive Caribbean

¶17. (C) An academic, Dookeran said he had written a document detailing the need for the small islands to be proactive in shaping global issues. He feels that due to poor governance, TT and similar countries have been unable to handle regional issues like crime, diversification of the economy, and infrastructure improvements. In order to help island countries change their behavior, Dookeran is considering starting an advisory organization.

Comment: Threading the Needle

¶18. (C) Dookeran has a difficult task ahead of him to keep the COP from fading from the scene due to its failure to secure any parliamentary seats last November. The history of third party movements that get shut out of parliament does not augur well for his effort. Internal party pressures and criticism of his leadership style -- both much in the news recently -- also suggest Dookeran is fighting on two fronts. He has to keep persons from leaving his movement and returning (largely) to the UNC even while trying to prepare the party for local elections. Though he shies away from calling it an alliance, his plan to only contest PNM local seats is a risky half-way house designed to keep his party together while not having it be swallowed up by the UNC. Whether he can thread this needle remains unclear.

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